

DON'T LET THEM HURT YOUR CHILDREN

Barbara Jennings sits in her cubicle on the third floor of a sprawling Department of Agriculture building in downtown D.C. She looks at the check lying like a mackerel in the middle of her calendar mat: \$445.22, made out to her landlord.

Rent. There's a knot in her gut, like a squeezing fist. She feels it on the first day of almost every month—and today is March 1. In a few minutes she'll begin her involved ritual, taking two buses to the offices of the real estate firm that operates scores of buildings in Southeast so she can personally deliver this payment.

She hates having to do it, but she has no grounds to quarrel. Yes, payments, in the past, have been late. Yes, her credit report is like a train wreck on computer paper. Not that it's uncommon for folks in her neighborhood. What galls her is how her landlord profits enthusiastically from understanding the vulnerability of his customers. If you're one day late, it's an additional charge of \$32.50. If it goes two weeks, eviction proceedings commence and legal fees swiftly pile up.

She leaves the office building, popping open her umbrella against a light rain, and decides to take a roundabout path to the subway to stop by the bank machine. She slips in her card as an act of faith. Maybe she calculated wrong, or there's been some sort of credit, or one of her prayers has been answered.

Not today. Available balance: \$478. She withdraws \$30 and slips the folded \$20 and \$10 bills into her skirt pocket.

"Lord," she mumbles, "the bad week is here again."

The ride is long, arching around half the city to the landlord's

office. From there, she catches another bus for the winding journey to church. Tonight is the Tuesday night prayer meeting. Last year, Cedric said he didn't want to go on Tuesdays, that he had too much homework, and she assented. He goes on Thursdays and Sundays, and she decided, reluctantly, that that is enough.

As she slides into a good seat by the window, she recalls something she didn't do today: call her brother Butch. The house where she and her nine siblings were raised on 15th Street, Southeast, has been in abeyance during the two years since their father died, leaving no will, and Butch moved in. He's been living there almost for free, and Barbara and her four sisters think they really should settle it—either have him buy out their shares or sell it outright. It could mean almost \$7,000 apiece for them, money Barbara sure could use, money that could finally get her ahead for once.

The bus inches along in the rush hour traffic of Washington, and she fingers the cash in her pocket. As a church missionary, she's supposed to give \$20 tonight, and she desperately wants to. The pastor says that every dollar given will return tenfold. She puts the \$10 in her purse and leaves the big bill in her pocket, where she can reach for it quickly.

Thinking of Butch brings her mind to the clapboard two-story on 15th Street where so much of her old life unfolded. The porch is the first thing she always thinks of, because that was always her refuge, the place to which she fled. Inside, the house was often an angry place. Her parents had moved to Washington from Plumbranch, South Carolina, when Barbara—the third oldest—was three. Seven more children followed. Her father, Maurice, was a construction worker by day and a janitor by night. Her mother, Janey Bell, worked an evening shift as a cook. Starting at nine years old, Barbara, a quiet, shy girl, mostly took care of the younger children. Other daughters were favorites of one parent or the other, and all the boys got off easy. Barbara worked, trying to win affection that never came, and then worked some more. Along the way, there were beatings. Both parents, overwrought with too little money and too many children, fiercely swung the belt—or anything they could grab. It would be decades before she got some distance from the violence. "They didn't call it child abuse then," she said years later to a friend.

By sixteen, she was searching for someone to take her away from it all, often dreaming of what might be as she stood on that porch, her back turned to the house. Plenty of someones came by, but none helped her escape. A decade later, she had two girls—Nanette, or Neddy, and Leslie—from brief relationships with two different men.

Those years took their toll, and she was a weary, pencil-thin bleached-blond at twenty-eight when she rounded the corner of 15th Street one day in August 1975, after a long day of data input in her low-rung federal job. Though she'd recently found an apartment for the girls and herself, Barbara couldn't shuck off the weight of her past. Still the dutiful daughter, she was stopping by to cook her father's dinner and noticed a man on the porch chatting with her sister Chris. A moment later, when introductions were made, she learned his name was Cedric Gilliam. Barbara said she'd seen him around. With a wide, quick smile, he took the hands of Chris's two-year-old son, Maurice, and walked him across the floorboards. "You staggering, just like your daddy. You didn't know I know your daddy," he said, as Chris giggled. When he passed the baby to Barbara, she noticed he was gentle with him.

"Any kids?" she asked.

"You kidding? I'm a free man," he said. "Maybe someday, you know, I'll settle down. But not yet."

She found out a few things about him—just enough, she didn't push. He had served time for bank robbery, was paroled last year, and had just finished his bachelor's degree in business from D.C.'s Federal City College, part of a program for former convicts.

College? She tried not to show that she was impressed, but it was easy to see. He pointed down the street to a hunter green Chrysler Cordoba. "All that fine Corinthian leather," he said, mimicking Ricardo Montalban in the famous ad, and Barbara chuckled. "That's right," he told her. "That car's brand spanking new."

"Okay, I might need a ride later," Barbara said coyly, before slipping inside.

She in fact did need a ride that night to her new apartment, and soon Cedric Gilliam was a regular visitor. Over the coming year as they ran and partied together, she found out some things that should have

made her cautious. There was more to his criminal past than she had at first thought, including a long string of bank robberies—serious, gun-in-the-face crimes—and the fact that he both dealt and used drugs. Most troubling, though, were some things he told her late one night about his father, Freddie. A truck driver, he mercilessly beat everyone in the Gilliam household, especially Cedric's mother, before deserting the family when Cedric was seven. Lying next to him, watching him as he slept, Barbara thought about how that desertion might have left the type of wounds that never heal.

But she had become a woman with few choices. She was busy and so was he, and when they were together everything was easy.

Until one morning in the fall of 1976. She called him from work and said that he should come by that night, that there was something they had to discuss.

"Well, I'm pregnant," she started as he settled into a kitchen chair across from her later that night. "And, the thing is, I really want to have this baby. I've wanted a boy, you see, and I think this could be it."

"Could be a girl," he replied evenly.

"I have this strong feeling, though, that it's not," she ventured, not sure if her hunch about the baby's gender was just a desperate wish. Growing up, she'd envied her brothers' easier lives and hoped to someday have a boy, too.

"You see," Cedric said, "I don't want no kids right now. Getting my degree and all, I'm getting my life on track." Barbara knew there were other women, and she wondered if he'd already decided to have kids with one of them, but she wouldn't press the point.

So around they swirled for hours—she, searching for emotions in him that she had long feared were absent, looking for something, anything, that might have bonded them together around the idea of a child; he, blunting her initiatives, seemingly telling her everything but the truth.

As dawn approached, after a lot of crying and screaming, she decided to drop her last card. She couldn't go any lower.

"You know, I've had some abortions before we met and all," she said, feeling her stomach tighten. "They say it ain't good to have too many. I mean, if I have another, it could ruin me."

He flinched, but he recovered quickly. "You already got two kids. Why you need more?" The words sounded godawful, and in a moment he was up, pounding around the living room, shaking his fists, ranting about how they "had it so good, everything going great, now this."

"Look, it's simple!" he hollered finally, his voice going shrill. "Either the baby or me. You have this baby, you won't be seeing me again. Ever!"

A few hours later in the mid-morning, she went to an abortion clinic near Capitol Hill, trying her best to stick with her plan to focus on how she was doing this for him, for their relationship. But she left, unable to go through with it, and called Cedric, hoping for some sympathy. She got only fury, as he told her flat out: "Keep the child and *we* are over."

After a few weeks of meandering reappraisals, she was back at the clinic. As a nurse with a clipboard asked if she'd had any abortions before, Barbara nodded and then said nothing for a moment. She began recalling all the broken promises, the years of betrayals from grinning, sweet-talking boys pretending to be men who had all by now run away.

"I've had enough," she said firmly, coming to. "I'll be going now." She nodded a thank you to the nurse, got up, and walked out into the crisp, brilliant November day, feeling an unfamiliar sense of purpose.

At 6 A.M. on July 24 of the following year, 1977, she caught a ride to Columbia Women's Hospital. After so much having gone wrong in her life, finally she was right about one thing. "Missus Jennings," the obstetrician said. "It's a boy."

Shifting on the bus to make room for an old man in the seat beside her, Barbara smiles as she recalls the words: "It's a boy," her boy. As the bus picks up speed again, she notices the passing landscape for the first time in half an hour, entering the Shaw neighborhood of D.C. Just a dozen blocks east of the lawyers and lobbyists on Connecticut Avenue and K Street, Shaw is a rutted, forgotten area of vacant lots, wandering prostitutes, and small, struggling shops tucked in the shadows of grimy

row houses. She's been coming here a few times a week for over sixteen years.

With little effort, she could calculate it to the day, she muses. Her son was three months old and she was depressed when a concerned friend dragged her to the Baltimore Armory to hear some middle-weight preachers. They were Apostolic Pentecostals, fiery men who leapt and yelped and danced, whipping the crowd to a frenzy of faith. People were running down the aisles, speaking in tongues, and she got swept up in it. A hole in her heart seemed to fill, if not heal, and she wept and wailed along with the rest of them.

The star that night was a skinny, boyish preacher named C. L. Long, and a few days after first hearing his booming voice Barbara was standing in his church, ready to be baptized by the water and to receive the Word.

Just shy of thirty years old, she finally seemed to find some bearings—enough, at least, to make a few decisions to stick by. First, she'd always call her son by his middle name, Lavar; second, they would spend every minute they could in the sanctuary of Scripture Church, the refuge of Pastor Long.

After the bus takes its usual last turn and stops, Barbara rises and slips out the back door onto the street. Towering before her is Scripture Cathedral, a soaring, drywall barn built a few years ago where the dour, brick Scripture Church once stood. Pastor Long is now called Bishop Long, a leader in the fast-growing order of black Pentecostals who've been steadily siphoning parishioners from mainstream urban churches.

The rain has stopped, and Barbara checks her watch. The service will be starting in ten minutes, so she walks briskly into the main entrance, passing under a hundred-foot wall of stained glass. She sits in the back for a moment. When she filters through memories as she did on today's bus ride it reminds her how she's invested everything in Lavar—all her hopes—giving their relationship a ferocious intensity, almost as volatile in some ways as the house she grew up in. She's so bound to his success, it sometimes scares her.

People are already filing down the mauve aisles and into the pews. Barbara walks slowly toward her regular pew near the pulpit where the

other missionary ladies are standing. It's faith, all about faith, she decides. If she can just keep Lavar's faith in God and in righteousness living intact for a little longer, blessings will come. Rewards will come. She knows they will.

The service crests forward in swells of fervor, then contemplation and then more fervor—all mixed in with traditional gospel standards. The rhythm is familiar and relaxes her. People come forward for blessings, and the crowd—about four hundred on this damp night—cheers for them and for themselves. She knows that Bishop Long will make a strong appeal for contributions (the church, as always, has pressing needs) and she settles back for the close of the service as he makes his plea.

"Let's talk about when you give your last dollar to God," shouts Long, now a heavyset man in his early fifties, with a wide, leonine head atop a cinder block body and the delicate ankles of a dancer. Smiling broadly, he eggs them on. "Then, and only then, will you know what faith is all about. Faith is taking the last \$10 from your checking account and saying, 'God, I give this to you, because I have *nothing* but faith, I live on faith, and I know in my heart that you'll bring it back to me in ways too grand and too many for me to even imagine.'"

The missionary men, holding out wicker baskets on long wicker poles, begin their walk down the aisles. Barbara fingers the \$20 in the pocket of her dark blue skirt. Numbers start running through her head: she'll need money for the week's commute; and whatever's left they'll need for food—a little, at least, for the four days until this Sunday's chicken dinner at church. The baskets are moving, filling up sure and steady, only three rows away. She shakes her head in frustration and stamps a heel on the carpet. Can't do it. She pulls her hand from her pocket, grabs her purse from the seat, hurriedly snatches out the \$10, and drops it gently on the soft nest of bills.

A boy, if he's lucky, discovers his limitations across a leisurely passage of years, with self-awareness arriving slowly. That way, at least he has plenty of time to heroically imagine himself first. Most boys unfold in this natural, measured way, growing up with at least one adult on the

scene who can convincingly fake being all-powerful, unfailingly protective for a kid's first decade or so, provide a canopy of reachable stars and monsters that are com-
believe.

By this reckoning, Cedric Lavar Jennings wasn't so lucky. Despite Barbara's best efforts, he was confronted at an early age with adult-strength realizations about powerlessness, desperation, and distrust, taking his dose right alongside the overwhelmed adults. This steady stream of shocks and reactions leaves so many boys raised in poor, urban areas stumbling toward manhood with a hardened exterior masking deep insecurities.

From the start, Cedric received a steady diet of uncertainty and upheaval. He and Barbara moved around a lot. There were too many stops to remember as they bounced from tiny, short-term rentals to pullout couches or bedrolls at one of Barbara's sisters' apartments. But at least they were together. Barbara's third big decision (after vowing to call him Lavar and to frequent the church) was to quit her secretary's job and go on welfare. Her son had just turned two. She had been made a junior missionary at the church, and being with her Lavar in these crucial years ("when," as she'd often say, "a child either gets the love he needs or he doesn't") was part of a reordering of her priorities. They lived frugally. The girls were in school, and Barbara and Lavar took buses to thrift shops in low-rent strip malls. She'd buy him books there and sometimes clothing. She'd prowl through the racks while he played with the secondhand toys. She bought cards with colors and numbers and they'd sit while she flashed the cards and drilled him. They visited museums and the Anacostia library. Countless hours were spent at the church. There were plenty of women around—between Barbara's sisters and Scripture's missionary ladies—and young Lavar was the pride of a matriarchy.

This sheltered, early period, though, was bound to be short lived. Just after Cedric's fifth birthday, Barbara knew she'd have to start building his defenses. He would start a full day of kindergarten in the fall, and she would go back to work. But before that, there were things Barbara wanted him to know.

They were living in Northeast on a busy python of traffic and

odise, Benning Road, just over a dry cleaners. It was 1982, and cocaine dealers were discovering the potency of a new concoction they called rock (later, crack), and dealers were beginning to use small children to make deliveries.

One day in late August, after Cedric and Barbara trolled a few thrift stores, they began walking the streets on all sides of the apartment. Barbara spoke to Cedric in careful, measured words. "You're gonna be a big kindergartner next week. And I got to be going back to get a job, when you're at school. Now, walking back from school, I don't want you to be talking to anyone, understand?"

He nodded, picking up on her seriousness. Then she squatted next to him, so their faces were side by side, and she pointed across the street. "See that man over there?" she said firmly. "He's a drug dealer. He sometimes asks kids to do things. Don't ever talk to him. He's a friend of the devil." Block by block, corner by corner they went, until she'd pointed out every drug dealer for five blocks in either direction. Later that night, she slowly explained the daily drill. After school, he would walk by himself to the apartment, double lock the door, and immediately call her—the number would be taped by the phone. And, along the way, he would talk to no one.

The first day of school arrived. She'd bought him an outfit specially for the day: blue slacks and a white shirt. She walked him over to Henry T. Blow Elementary, which was just behind their apartment.

"Here, I got something for you." She took from her purse a fake gold chain with a key on the end and put it around his neck.

"This, so you won't lose it."

"Ma," he said, already conscious of his appearance, "can I wear it underneath?"

She nodded, and he slipped it inside the crew neck of his white shirt. Years later, he would recall that dangling key—the metal cold against his smooth chest—and think ruefully about how exhilarating it felt: a first, cool breeze of freedom.

By that afternoon, he was a little man, walking purposefully across the playground and around the block to the apartment, unlocking and then locking the door, calling his mother to say he was all right. She started a new job as a data input clerk at the Department of Agriculture,

ture, and soon Cedric knew the phone number by heart. It was a ritual he'd repeat almost every day—double locking the door of this apartment or that—for nearly a decade.

And one other thing changed. The birth certificate that was required to enroll him in school listed his full name. He might be Lavar at home and at church, but now he was Cedric Jennings at school. "Saydric . . . Sееeedric . . . Cedric," he'd say over and over, sitting alone in the apartment after school, watching afternoon reruns of *I Love Lucy* or *The Brady Bunch* or *All in the Family*. The name felt odd, like a bad fit, and he'd often wonder why his mother chose it.

He was Barbara's little partner, sticking close to the trinity of school, church, and the locked apartment, trying—with sterling behavior and glowing notes from his teachers—to keep her from worrying all the time. Once, when his half-sister Leslie was baby-sitting, she had taken Cedric with her to visit her boyfriend down the street. As Leslie dragged him home later, having lost track of time, she whined, "God, hurry up Lavar. Ma'll be back soon." Suddenly, they were caught by a frightening specter: a nearly maniacal Barbara, wild-eyed, switch in hand, who snatched Leslie in midstride and snapped the switch across her face. Terrified, Cedric began to scream. His mother's continuous apprehension—and attacks, like that night, of genuine panic—left Cedric certain there was danger everywhere.

When Leslie and Nanette had gone off to live with relatives, Barbara and Cedric left the apartment on Benning Road to live with her sister Rose "Tiny" Jennings. One Friday night in the early spring of 1985, the phone rang at their apartment.

"For you, Barbara," Tiny called to her sister, "It's some guy." The two-bedroom apartment—shared by Barbara, her sister, Cedric, and his two cousins—was small, and Barbara got quickly to the phone.

"Ummmm. Barbara? This is Cedric. Cedric Gilliam. I was wondering if I can see the boy."

"What's the occasion?" she asked coolly, not skipping a beat. He explained that word of his fatherhood had gotten out—the one girlfriend of his who knew told another one who didn't. "So what's the point of hiding it? And, you know, I'd like to know him."

The next morning, Barbara sat Cedric down, turned off his cartoons, and explained that his father was coming. The child, just seven years old, was beside himself with joy.

That day, Cedric Sr. took his son to the beautiful two-bedroom apartment he shared with a woman named Joyce, who seemed like a wife. There was the closet full of suits, the giant TV, the stereo, and the still plush green Cordoba. They had lunch and went to K-mart, where he bought his son a Bugs Bunny costume, with Halloween coming soon. The child wore it to bed that night and under his Sunday best the next day to church.

There were a few other visits. Barbara would always be there when Cedric got home, seeming more anxious than ever. To calm her, Cedric told her of everything he and his father talked about and of all those silky possessions.

Walking amid the plenty in his father's apartment one Saturday, Cedric saw a pewter mug full of coins. He poured them into his pocket and later told his mother they were a gift. In fact, they were rare coins that a desperate customer had bartered in exchange for heroin. At the next week's visit, Cedric Jr. walked into an ambush when his father, a lifelong thief, determined he would teach his newfound son a lesson about stealing. The boy was made to strip, and the whipping with a thick leather belt was ferocious, halted only when Joyce finally grabbed Gilliam's arm and screamed for him to stop.

Cedric had now learned about betrayal and misplaced trust. And, a few weeks later, about abandonment. Cedric Gilliam was picked up for heroin dealing and armed robbery. He disappeared for a term of twelve to thirty-six years into Lorton Correctional Institution, the D.C. Federal prison in northern Virginia.

The shocks kept coming to his son, fast and steady. Barbara, concerned about both the risks Cedric faced in their treacherous neighborhood and the effects of his father's beating, mustered a furious run at a better life for them both. She used all of her money to rent a four-bedroom apartment in grassy, suburban Landover, Maryland, a working-class area just across the District line. Neddy and Leslie, now teenagers, returned home. Cedric had his own bedroom, played in the

complex's landscaped courtyard with other children, and attended a mostly white elementary school, where his studiousness and good manners quickly ingratiated him to his teachers. The furniture was from Rent-a-Center.

The apartment was far beyond Barbara's minimum-wage means, and six months later the eviction crew arrived. All of it ended up on the street, picked over and hauled off by neighbors. Everything vanished, except maybe the psychological scar left on Cedric while he sat on the stoop and cried, watching as kids divvied up his beloved He-Man action figure collection.

More apartments and more evictions followed for mother and son before a move back to the dreaded house on 15th Street. They made another move to a tiny apartment in a building that caught on fire while Cedric was home alone. Then finally they landed on V Street, Southeast, in a tiny, dank, one-bedroom near some of the city's worst drug dealing. Always careful not to part the curtains more than a crack, Cedric would watch the dealers, guns sometimes visible, stash drugs in the alley beneath his window.

Any parent surveying this wreckage would have been dispirited, and Barbara no doubt was. Everyone of every age in this neighborhood ingested gut-churning dread regularly. Gunshots. Arrests. Sirens all night. The chances of a boy emerging from here intact were almost nil. In desperation, Barbara tried to keep a tight grip on just the basics: strong physical discipline and tight scheduling. She made sure her son was either in school, in the locked apartment, or at church, visiting Scripture Cathedral four times a week.

One Sunday, Barbara was, as usual, down in the church basement, cooking the congregation's dinner, to be served after the midday service. It allowed her to get a meal for nothing, rather than paying \$3, and to slip a free one to Cedric.

One of the missionary ladies ran down to the kitchen. "Your baby is singing—front of everyone."

"What?" Barbara screamed, dropping the fried chicken tin and running upstairs.

The children's choir, about fifty strong, had been singing, with

Cedric in his usual role anchoring a clutch of boy tenors, when something seemed to well up inside him and he suddenly stepped forward.

"He will never leave me or forsake me," Cedric sang, his voice rising above the others. "Please don't let them hurt your children. Oh, God, please don't let them hurt your children."

Watching this drama of the spirit, the crowd yelped with joy. "Do it! Sing it!" someone cried out.

Barbara heard the cheers as she bounded up the stairs toward the sanctuary, wiping her hands on her skirt as she ran.

"Please don't let them hurt your children," he sang out, growing with each verse, more comfortable in front of the crowd. "Please, ooooo please, Jesus, don't let them hurt your children." His mother, bursting through the rear doors a moment too late, heard only the applause.

After this breakthrough, Cedric seemed to nudge himself along. He learned to talk about Cedric Gilliam without getting upset, and, with Cedric Sr. safely in jail, Barbara felt freer to be candid about all that had gone sour in his father's life. Soon enough, she became convinced that such knowledge actually motivated her son, only a fourth grader, to live in reaction to his father, using Cedric Gilliam's rutted path to find coordinates for an opposing course he would carve.

For both mother and son, one thing was certain: at the darkest moments, there was always the sanctuary of Scripture Cathedral. Like for so many inner-city blacks who left mainstream churches for Pentecostal congregations in the 1970s and 1980s (making it the fastest-growing denomination in the country), Scripture Cathedral offered Cedric and Barbara neat designations of good and evil and strict rules forbidding even common activities, like watching movies or dressing provocatively. For Barbara, who, like so many, came to fervent Pentecostalism from a life broken by poverty and neglect, the church provided both moral orderliness and an absolution for past failures that finally allowed her peace about all that had gone wrong over the years. Here, success was not an honor, nor privation a dishonor; the Lord assiduously threw up tests and kept score based solely on faith. Bishop Long, in his sermons, railed against the sins of pride and ambition.

Yet one meritocracy was permitted: music. That was the path Cedric stumbled onto. Those who could sanctify God with their sweet or strong voices—a dozen adults and half that many children—were permitted a special place, front and center. Cedric became a youthful star of the children's choir, a soloist. Where so much about life at Scripture Cathedral, indeed, meant a withdrawal from this world, the confidence infused in a young boy, standing before six hundred or so parishioners on a Sunday, was a single, buoying item an eleven-year-old Cedric, as a fifth grader, could carry beyond the church's walls.

At this age, Cedric aimed to please. He did his chores, which were many, with Barbara often telling him that she'd done her share when she was a kid and he would do his share. And he was obedient. Having felt Barbara's wrath, he took seriously when she'd warn, "I tell you once. I don't tell you twice." By sixth grade, he was a skinny, earnest, straight arrow, a little taller than the other kids and mostly quiet—waiting to be noticed.

Then came a victory: acceptance into Jefferson Junior High School, a magnet junior high, an anointed place. Jefferson was the type of school that had sprouted from the urban landscape in the past few decades like a flower, nourished by the rich decay and detritus all around. One out of every twenty or so sixth-grade applicants made it in. Three years later, most of those students managed to be accepted into one of the District's few top magnet high schools, which in turn sent almost all their graduates to college.

Safely inside the gates of Jefferson, Cedric found for the first time something resembling a traditional American school. There were other smart, mostly well-behaved kids, sort of like him. Soon he was part of a group of boys—LaKeith Ellis, Torrence Parks, and Eric Welcher—from working-class, mostly two-parent black families. Barbara would sometimes overhear Cedric on the phone with one of them and pick up just the right mix of friendly jostling and competitiveness. At night, Cedric studied ardently. The expectations here were much higher than he'd been used to—the kids were motivated. The seventh-grade curriculum stressed memorization of basic concepts in math, English, and history. Cedric's ardor and ability to focus helped him accumulate a loose-leaf notebook full of A papers.

In the evenings, after he was asleep, Barbara would flip through the notebook, gently fingering the papers, memorizing the comments from teachers. Sitting there, she'd often think that she also had to do her part. She was thankful to the church for Cedric's success, and she showed her gratitude with money in the Sunday basket. He needed better clothes and school supplies and maybe a little money to spend with his new friends. She needed to look presentable when she met with teachers or Vera White, the principal. One afternoon, she left work and strolled through fashionable shops in downtown D.C. She knew what she wanted, it would just take a while to find it. That night she brought home a crimson sweatshirt for Cedric, with "HARVARD" stamped across the chest.

But, just like in Landover, when she pushed too hard or wanted too much or became too hopeful, a few small stumbles would upset her balance.

Her finances on \$5 an hour were, as always, precarious. Again, some of the furniture was rented. Tiny indulgences were enough to push some must-pay bills past thirty days. Old creditors, some collecting on bills dating back years, kept calling. Leslie was still sleeping at the apartment but running with a racier crowd. One of her boyfriends wound up at Lorton and called her collect from the prison pay phone to talk for hours on some evenings. The bill blossomed, and the phone got cut off.

When the first cool days of autumn came in 1990, both mother and son felt it. The gas had been turned off, which meant hot plates for cooking and no heat. Barbara and Cedric taped plastic over the windows. Living without heat was harder than either of them could have expected. When winter arrived, Cedric slept in thermal underwear and thrift-store down jackets. Sometimes there was no food in the house. The electricity was cut off, restored, then cut off again. Cedric started showing up late for school, often hungry and wearing mismatched clothes.

Barbara watched what was happening, helplessly, just like in the last days at Landover. Meanwhile, Cedric's workload increased, as the eighth-grade curriculum stressed more analysis than memorization, and

he began to resent having to study at night in the cold, sometimes dark apartment. One night in frustration, he yelled at her, "How can I compete? It's like I'm living in a refrigerator!" She moved to hit him, to punish him for disrespecting her, but guilt held her back.

Each Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday they went to church. Barbara still tithed her 10 percent, prayed for strength and faith, and usually dropped a \$20 into the Sunday basket. One night, thinking about how Cedric would someday go to college, she prayed that men from the congregation would come forward to pay for it, and she dropped her last dollar in the basket.

Like Barbara's dammed-up debts that eventually broke in a flood of dunning calls and legal threats, Cedric, too, had built up a debt of sorts. His voice had won him an indulgence—years of dispensation—in the type of prideful individual achievement that the church otherwise frowned upon. In the tough winter of eighth grade, much of what kept him going was being on the bishop's special TV choir, which sang on a local UHF station, and, most important, standing front and center on Sunday, reaffirmed by the congregation's shouts of "Amen" and "Praise Jesus" as he sang out his faith.

Quietly at first, the complaints were whispered to Bishop Long and other church leaders. Why him? He's been up there so long, why not give some other kids a chance? Barbara heard the grumbles and tried to ferret out the sources. She knew how important the singing was to Cedric.

But it was no use. On an early spring Saturday during choir practice, Steve Lawrence, Scripture's young choir director, took Cedric aside. "Some people are complaining about you singing all the solos," he told him. "It's time for other people to have a try singing solo."

And so, on Sunday, Cedric stepped back. When people asked why, he wasn't sure what to say, and it boiled inside him.

Barbara tried to offer counsel. They talked often late into the night about it, as she tried to find passages from Scripture that would help ease his feelings of rejection and censure. "It's like I've done something wrong for being proud to sing God's praises," he moaned one night. He said he was tired, too tired to do homework, and went to bed early.

left but get them to Sunday dinner at church. She can write a check on Monday, which won't arrive at the bank until Tuesday, when her weekly check will have been deposited.

Relieved to have some sort of plan, she puts her head back and drifts off. At 10:15, she awakens with a jerk in the glow of the TV. She walks around the apartment to clear her head and grabs a glass of some flat Coke from the nearly empty refrigerator. She looks over at the overflowing sink.

"Lavar?!" she calls out, loud and testy, as she makes for the couch. "What about these dishes?"

Cedric stomps out of his room, takes off his gray wool polo shirt, torn at the elbow, and bellies up to the sink in his white undershirt.

He thrusts his arms into the wet dishes and muck. Barbara sees him from the corner of her eye. She knows there's nothing worse than doing dishes when you're hungry.

"This is completely disgusting," he mumbles, and looks toward the couch. She heard him but looks straight ahead at the TV, deciding she's not going to respond.

She feels herself start to simmer. She would have gotten a beating for saying that to her father, much less her mother. A bad beating. A switch seems to flip in her gut, starting a familiar internal monologue: she's been working like a slave her whole damn life and *she* never complains. . . . She's been killing herself, her lifeblood channeled through scriptural pieties and long-shot hopes for Cedric's future, leaving her own urges untended and volatile.

"I hate doing these damn dishes," he says, this time too loud to ignore.

She jumps up, thumping across the room, fast, right up into his face. "I pay the rent here. I support you. I give everything to you. You don't want to do your part? You don't like it? When you complain it makes me want to kill you! You hear me?"

He's stunned and begins to cry. His hands, full of grease and congealed fat, stay plunged in the water.

The switch now flips back, the fury gone, and she looks away, ashamed. An apology rises toward her lips, but she bites it off. No, no. Can't apologize. She goes back to the couch.

Cedric gathers himself, silently finishes the dishes, and then gets the bucket and Ajax under the sink to scrub the bathroom.

Barbara Jennings will lie out here tonight, like every night (her double bed long ago buried under a mountain of clothes), hating that she erupted, wondering how Jesus might help her with her anger, wondering where it springs from. For now, though, she flips the channels fast, barely able to make sense of the flashing pictures.